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ABSTRACT

The social and economic characteristics of adult students enrolled in postsecondary schools (collegiate and noncollegiate) in spring 1976 are examined, based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 1976 Survey of Income and Education. For students who were dependents, information is presented on their families. Findings include the following: adult students (25 years old and older) accounted for 41 percent of the total college enrollment in 1976; of the 5 million adult students in college, 3.6 million were attending part time; most adult students were between 25-35 years old, but the 35-year-old and over group constituted one-third of the adult collegiate enrollment; 42 percent of adult undergraduate students were female; fewer than 1 in 10 adult college students were still financially dependent on their parents; larger proportions of adult dependent college students were in the lower income categories compared to all dependent college students; nearly a third of all adults who were enrolled in postsecondary schools were enrolled in noncollegiate schools; among noncollegiate adult students, 80 percent were high school graduates and 20 percent were not; larger proportions of adult dependent noncollegiate students were in the lower income categories compared to all dependent noncollegiate students; and smaller proportions of adult independent noncollegiate students were in the two lowest income categories compared to the proportions of all independent noncollegiate students. (SW)

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Characteristics of Postsecondary Students Twenty-Five Years and Older

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National Center for Education Statistics

Characteristics of Postsecondary Students Twenty-Five Years and Older

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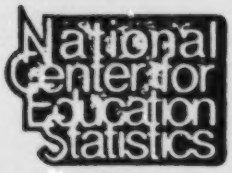

National Center for Education Statistics

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FOREWORD

This report is one of a series of five reports describing the socioeconomic characteristics of different groups of postsecondary students. It is based on analyses of Survey of Income and Education data, collected by the Bureau of the Census in Spring 1976. The other reports cover:

- Students with Language Backgrounds other than English
- Hispanic Students
- Women Students
- Black Students

Technical Notes, available in a separate report, describe the survey methodology and provide definitions and standard errors for selected items.

Susan Hill served as project officer of the contract to conduct secondary analyses of Survey of Income and Education data. Susan Hill and Alice Kroliczak coauthored the reports on the characteristics of postsecondary students. Joseph Froomkin, of Joseph Froomkin Inc., conducted the analyses of the data under contract to NCES.

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January 1982

How to Obtain More Information

The Technical Notes and single copies of this report and other series reports can be obtained free while supplies last by sending a request with a separate self-addressed mailing label for each report to: Statistical Information Office, National Center for Education Statistics, 400 Maryland Avenue SW., (Presidential Building), Washington, D.C. 20202, telephone (301) 436-7900. Information about the Center's statistical program and a catalog of NCES publications may also be obtained from the Statistical Information Office.

Additional information about the series of reports on postsecondary students is available from Susan Hill, National Center for Education Statistics, 400 Maryland Avenue, SW. (Presidential Building), Washington, D.C. 20202, telephone (301) 436-7860.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Adult students accounted for 41 percent of the total college enrollment in 1976. For purposes of this report, students who are 25 years or older are referred to as "adult students."
- Of the 5 million adult students in college, 3.6 million were attending part time.
- Most adult students were between 25 and 35. However, persons 35 and over constituted one-third of the adult collegiate enrollment.
- Forty-two percent of adult undergraduate students were female.
- Less than one in ten adult college students were still financially dependent on their parents.
- Larger proportions of adult dependent college students were in the lower income categories compared to all dependent college students.
- The income distribution of adult independent college students indicated a smaller proportion of persons with low incomes compared with the distribution for all independent college students.
- In Spring 1976 nearly a third of all adults who were enrolled in postsecondary schools were enrolled in noncollegiate schools.
- Among noncollegiate adult students, 80 percent were high school graduates and 20 percent were not.
- Larger proportions of adult dependent noncollegiate students were in the lower income categories compared to all dependent noncollegiate students.
- Smaller proportions of adult independent noncollegiate students were in the two lowest income categories compared to the proportions of all independent noncollegiate students.

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INTRODUCTION

This report is principally concerned with students in postsecondary education who are 25 years old or older. For convenience in exposition, these will generally be referred to as "adult students."

The total enrollment of adult students increased by 44 percent between October 1972, the first year for which data are available, and October 1976. During the same period, the enrollment of persons under the age of 25 increased by only 13 percent.1/ Since the number of younger students is likely to decline in the near future, administrators of postsecondary institutions are becoming increasingly concerned with stimulating adult enrollment even further. Analyses of the enrollments of adults are thus of special interest to those concerned with the growth of the higher education system.

This report is based on data collected by the Census Bureau with the Survey of Income and Education.2/ It analyzes the social and economic characteristics of adult students who were enrolled in postsecondary schools in the spring of 1976. The report discusses collegiate students first. This section is followed by a chapter describing adult participation in noncollegiate post-secondary education. In the case of adults who are still financially dependent on their parents, information is presented concerning their families. The report concludes with a discussion of enrollment by family size. Standard errors have been calculated and differences between groups are cited in the text only if the difference was statistically significant at the .05 level or beyond.

1/ U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 247, "School Enrollment in the United States: 1972," U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 1973.

U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 319, "School Enrollment—Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 1976," U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 1978.

2/ For definition of terms and a description of the Survey of Income and Education, see the Technical Notes.

CHAPTER 1

ENROLLMENT IN COLLEGE

Participation Rates

In Spring 1976, there were approximately 12 million college students in the United States and 41 percent of these were adults, i.e., over age 24. This is a large percentage when one considers that traditionally the college-going age has been considered to be roughly 18-24.

Item	Total number (in thousands)	Number of adults (in thousands)	Adults as percent of total number
Population 16 and over	154,661	119,226	77
High school graduates	98,101	76,050	78
Enrollment in college	11,955	4,852	41

Although 41 percent of the total college enrollment is comprised of persons 25 and older, some subgroups have smaller proportions of adult students. Only 38 percent of all women college students are 25 and older, as are 25 percent of students living below the poverty level. Another subgroup, students with language backgrounds other than English, has a higher proportion of adult students (49 percent).

Table 1.—College students who are age 25 and over, by student subgroups: 1976

Student subgroup	Total number of students (in thousands)	Number of adult students (in thousands)	Adult students as percent of total subgroup students
Women	5,438	2,064	38
Blacks	1,223	546	45
Hispanics	471	223	47
Students with language backgrounds other than English	1,276	623	49
Students living below the poverty level	600	152	25

Characteristics of Adult Students

Almost three-fourths of all adult college students attended college part-time. Nearly 3.6 million out of a total adult enrollment of almost 5 million were estimated to be enrolled in part-time programs. While 59 percent of all adult college students were enrolled at the undergraduate level, the remaining 41 percent were students who had completed their undergraduate education and were attending graduate or professional school or adult education classes at a college (table 2).

Table 2.—Adult and all college students, by level of enrollment and attendance status: 1976

Level of enrollment* and attendance status	Adult students		All students
	Number (in thousands)	Percent of total	Percent of total
Total	4,852	100	100
Undergraduate enrollment	2,880	59	78
Full-time	818	17	50
Part-time	2,062	42	28
Other enrollment	1,972	41	22
Full-time	455	9	8
Part-time	1,517	31	14

*The student may or may not be enrolled in a degree program.
NOTE: Details may not add to totals because of rounding.

As one would expect, adult students tended to be concentrated at the lower age levels. Forty-three percent were in the 25-29 year age bracket. If one considers just full-time adult students, 61 percent were in this age bracket, compared with 36 percent of part-time adult students (table 3).

Table 3.—Adult college students, by attendance status and age: 1976

Age group	Total	Full-time	Part-time
	Percentage distribution		
Total	100	100	100
25-29	43	61	36
30-34	22	16	25
35-64	34	22	38
65 and older	1	*	1

*Percent not shown where estimate was less than 20,000 persons.

Adult students age 35 and over accounted for roughly a third of the adult collegiate enrollment. The number of persons 65 and older who were enrolled represented only a minuscule part of the adults in collegiate programs.

The proportion of women among adult students is equal to the proportion of women among the total collegiate enrollment. While women accounted for 45 percent of the collegiate enrollment at all ages, the share of women among college students age 25 and over was 43 percent. Women represented about 43 percent of adult enrollment regardless of attendance level or full-time status (table 4).

Table 4.—Women as a percent of adult college enrollment, by attendance level and status: 1976

Attendance level and status	Total (in thousands)	Women (in thousands)	Women as percent of total
Total adult enrollment	4,852	2,064	43
Undergraduate	2,880	1,220	42
Full-time	818	325	40
Part-time	2,062	895	43
Other enrollment	1,972	844	43
Full-time	455	188	41
Part-time	1,517	656	43

Dependency status

The vast majority of adult college students, over 90 percent, were financially independent of their parental families, i.e., living on their own or with their spouse and/or children. Independent adult college students were just as likely to be enrolled at the undergraduate level as were dependent adult college students (60 percent). However, independent adult college students were more likely to attend college part-time than dependent adult college students (table 5).

Table 5.—Number and percent distribution of adult college students, by dependency, attendance level and status: 1976

Attendance level and status	Dependent		Independent	
	Number (in thousands)	Percent of total	Number (in thousands)	Percent of total
Total adult enrollment	463	100	4,389	100
Undergraduate	286	62	2,594	59
Full-time	181	39	637	15
Part-time	105	23	1,957	45
Other enrollment	177	38	1,795	41
Full-time	76	16	379	9
Part-time	101	22	1,416	32

NOTE: Details may not add to totals because of rounding.

Financial Resources of Dependent Students and Their Families

Larger proportions of adult dependent college students were in the lower income categories compared to all dependent college students. One sixth of all adult dependent college students lived in families where the parental income was less than $5,000, double the proportion of all dependent college students in this income group. In addition, 20 percent of adult dependent college students were members of families with incomes between $5,000 and $10,000 in contrast to only 12 percent of all dependent college students. At the other end of the income spectrum, 25 percent of adult dependent college students and 46 percent of all dependent college students lived in families with incomes of $20,000 and over (table 6).

Table 6.—Dependent adult and all dependent college students, by attendance status and income group: 1975

Parental income	Adult students			All students		
	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time
	Percentage distribution					
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Less than $5,000	16	*	*	8	8	8
$5,000-$9,999	20	16	26	12	12	14
$10,000-$14,999	21	21	22	16	15	20
$15,000-$19,999	18	*	*	18	18	18
$20,000 and over	25	28	22	46	47	40
Number (in thousands) ...	463	257	206	6,073	5,064	1,009

*Percent not shown where estimate was less than 20,000 persons.
NOTE: Details may not add to totals because of rounding.

The relative lack of economic resources of families of adult dependent college students can be illustrated in another way. A higher proportion of adult dependent college students had no assets, and the proportion of adult dependent college students who lived in families with assets of $20,000 and over was lower than that of all dependent college students (table 7).

Table 7.--Dependent adult and all dependent college students, by size of family financial assets: 1975

Family Assets	Adult students	All students
	Percentage distribution	
Total	100	100
No assets	16	9
$1-$19,999	26	25
$20,000-$39,999	25	27
$40,000 and over	35	39
Total with information (in thousands)	412	5,248
No information* (in thousands)	51	825

*Includes nonresponse and those whose owner-occupied property and/or mortgage exceeded $100,000.
NOTE: Details may not add to totals because of rounding.

Among dependent undergraduates attending school full-time, 69 percent of adult students worked during the year compared to 79 percent of all students. It is not possible to provide any further reliable information on the earnings of adult dependent full-time undergraduate students because the sample size for this group was too small (table 8).

Table 8.--Percent of dependent adult and all dependent full-time undergraduate students with earnings: 1975

Item	Adult undergraduates	All undergraduates
Number of students (in thousands)	181	4,781
Percent with earnings	69	79

NOTE: Details may not add to totals because of rounding.

Financial Resources of Independent Students

Three-fourths of independent adult students attended college part-time. This is reflected in the income distribution of adult independent college students. A smaller proportion of adult students had low incomes compared with all independent college students. Only 24 percent of all adult independent college students had incomes under $10,000 compared to 35 percent of all independent college students. Among independent college students, 5 percent of adult students were living below the poverty level compared to 8 percent of all students (table 9).

Table 9.—Independent adult and all independent college students, by individual/family income and poverty status: 1975

Income	Adult students			All students		
	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time
	Percentage distribution					
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Less than $5,000	8	24	4	14	32	6
$5,000-$9,999	16	35	10	21	35	14
$10,000-$14,999	22	18	23	22	17	23
$15,000-$19,999	22	11	25	19	9	23
$20,000 and over	32	11	38	25	7	34
Total number (in thousands).....	4,389	1,016	3,372	5,882	1,868	4,014
Percent of students below poverty level	5	14	2	8	15	3

NOTE: Details may not add to totals because of rounding.

Smaller proportions of adult independent college students had assets under $20,000 compared to all independent college students (table 10).

Table 10.—Independent adult and all independent college students, by individual/family assets: 1975

Assets	Adult students	All students
	Percentage distribution	
Total	100	100
No assets	20	25
$1-$19,999	48	50
$20,000-$39,999	19	15
$40,000 and over	13	10
Total number (in thousands)	4,168	5,649
No information* (in thousands)	221	233

*Includes nonresponse and those whose owner-occupied property and/or mortgage exceeded $100,000.

The proportion of adult independent full-time undergraduate students who worked and had earnings was lower than the proportion of all independent full-time undergraduate students. However, the average yearly income of adult independent full-time college students was higher than the income of all independent full-time college students in general (table 11).

Table 11.—Earnings of independent adult and all independent full-time undergraduate students: 1975

Item	Adult undergraduates	All undergraduates
Number of students (in thousands)	637	1,252
Percent with earnings	71	79
Mean earnings ($) of students who worked*	$4,410	$3,758

*The difference between the two means is statistically significant at the .05 level.

CHAPTER 2

ENROLLMENT IN NONCOLLEGIATE SCHOOLS

In 1976 nearly a third of all adults who were enrolled in postsecondary schools (collegiate or noncollegiate) were enrolled in noncollegiate schools such as vocational schools, adult education, CETA, correspondence, etc.

Adults accounted for 70 percent of the total enrollment in noncollegiate schools, which was lower than their proportion of the total population (77 percent). Of the 2,042,000 adults enrolled in noncollegiate schools in the Spring of 1976, one-fifth had not graduated from high school, as was the case with all noncollegiate students.

Some 56 percent of the adult students in noncollegiate schools were 35 years old or older. The age distributions of adult noncollegiate students who were high school graduates, and those who were not, were quite different. Among high school graduates, 53 percent were age 35 or older, as compared with some 66 percent of the non-high school graduates (table 12).

Table 12.—Adults and all noncollegiate students, by completion of high school and age group: 1976

Age group	Adult students			All students		
	Total	High school graduates	Did not complete high school	Total	High school graduates	Did not complete high school
	Percentage distribution					
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
16 to 24 years	0	0	0	30	30	30
25 to 34 years	44	47	34	31	33	24
35 years and over..	56	53	66	39	37	46
Number (in thousands).....	2,042	1,632	409	2,903	2,315	588

NOTE: Details may not add to totals because of rounding.

Women accounted for 47 percent of the adult noncollegiate enrollment. Furthermore, women were as likely as men to be part-time students (table 13).

Table 13.—Adults enrolled in noncollegiate schools, by attendance status and sex: 1976

Sex	Total		Full-time		Part-time	
	Number (in thousands)	Percent of total	Number (in thousands)	Percent of total	Number (in thousands)	Percent of total
Total.....	2,042	100	445	22	1,597	78
Women	965	47	200	21	765	79
Men	1,077	53	245	23	832	77

Financial Resources of Dependent Students and Their Families

Only 124,000 adult noncollegiate students (23 percent of the total) were financially dependent on their parents. The rest were financially independent. Larger proportions of adult dependent noncollegiate students were in the lower income categories compared to all dependent noncollegiate students. Fifty-nine percent of all adult dependent noncollegiate students lived in families where parental income was less than $10,000 in contrast with only 42 percent of all dependent noncollegiate students (table 14).

Table 14.--Dependent adult and all dependent noncollegiate students, by attendance status and income group: 1975

Parental income	Adult students			All students		
	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time
	Percentage distribution					
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Less than $5,000	33	44	24	20	23	14
$5,000-$9,999	26	*	*	22	23	21
$10,000-$14,999	*	*	*	20	18	22
$15,000-$19,999	*	*	*	17	15	21
$20,000 and over	*	*	*	21	20	22
Number (in thousands) ..	124	57	68	529	322	207

*Percent not shown where estimate was less than 20,000 persons.
NOTE: Details may not add to totals because of rounding.

Working while attending school was as common among adult dependent noncollegiate students as among all dependent noncollegiate students. Among dependent noncollegiate students, 47 percent of adults and 59 percent of all students worked while attending school. It is not possible to provide any further reliable information on the earnings of adult dependent full-time noncollegiate students because the sample size for this group was too small (table 15).

Table 15.--Percent of dependent adult and all dependent full-time noncollegiate students with earnings: 1975

Item	Adult students	All students
Number of students (in thousands)	57	322
Percent with earnings	47	59

Financial Resources of Independent Students

Smaller proportions of adult independent noncollegiate students were in the two lowest income categories compared to the proportions of all independent noncollegiate students. Slightly more than a fourth of all adult independent noncollegiate students had individual or family incomes under $10,000 in contrast with slightly more than a third of all independent noncollegiate students. Also, 9 percent of adult independent noncollegiate students were living below the poverty level compared with 12 percent of all independent noncollegiate students (table 16).

Table 16.--Independent adult and all independent noncollegiate students, by individual/family income and poverty status: 1975

Income	Adult students	All students
	Percentage distribution	
Total	100	100
Less than $5,000	12	16
$5,000-$9,999	16	19
$10,000-$14,999	25	25
$15,000-$19,999	20	18
$20,000 and over	27	23
Total number (in thousands)	1,918	2,374
Percent of students below poverty level	9	12

NOTE: Details may not add to totals because of rounding.

Among independent noncollegiate students, the proportion who had no assets was lower among adult students than among all students (table 17).

Table 17.--Independent adult and all independent noncollegiate students, by individual/family assets: 1975

Assets	Adult students	All students
	Percentage distribution	
Total	100	100
No assets	24	30
$1-$19,999	39	40
$20,000-$39,999	18	15
$40,000 and over	19	15
Total number (in thousands)	1,757	2,211
No information* (in thousands)	161	163

*Includes nonresponse and those whose owner-occupied property and/or mortgage exceeded $100,000.

Similar proportions of adult and all independent full-time noncollegiate students worked during the year. It is not possible to provide any further reliable information on the earnings of adult independent full-time noncollegiate students because the sample size for this group was too small (table 18).

Table 18.--Percent of independent adult and all independent full-time noncollegiate students with earnings: 1975

Item	Adult students	All students
Number of students (in thousands)	389	568
Percent with earnings	67	71

CHAPTER 3

CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILIES WITH ADULT STUDENTS ENROLLED IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Adult dependent students enrolled in postsecondary (collegiate and noncollegiate) education tended to come from families where the family head was relatively less educated than was the case with dependent students in general. For example, one-third of the adult dependent students lived in families where the head was not a high school graduate, as compared with one-fifth of all dependent students. Also, 31 percent of adult dependent students came from families whose head had completed one or more years of college, contrasted with 46 percent of all dependent students (table 19).

Table 19.--Dependent adult and all dependent postsecondary students, by educational attainment of family head: 1976

Educational attainment of parental family head	Adult students	All students
	Percentage distribution	
Total	100	200
Elementary school	19	11
Some high school	17	11
High school graduate	33	31
Some college	14	17
College graduate	17	29
Total number (in thousands)	587	6,602

NOTE: Details may not add to totals because of rounding.

Almost one in five adult dependent students lived in a family where the only other member was the parent, three times the proportion of all dependent postsecondary school students. About 19 percent lived in families with five or more members, compared with 40 percent of all dependent students. In other words, among dependent students, adults tended to come from smaller families than was true of all students. With respect to independent students, the reverse was true (table 20).

Table 20.--Adult and all postsecondary students, by family size and dependency status: 1976

Dependency status	Number of persons in family					
	Percentage distribution					
Dependent	Total	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six or more
Adult students	100	18	35	28	11	8
All students	100	6	24	29	19	21

Independent	Total	One	Two	Three	Four or More
Adult students	100	17	22	19	41
All students	100	22	27	18	33

Reports available in this Series are:

Characteristics of Hispanic Postsecondary Students

Characteristics of Black Postsecondary Students

Characteristics of Women Postsecondary Students

Characteristics of Postsecondary Students Twenty-five Years and Older

Characteristics of Postsecondary Students with Non-English Language Backgrounds